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Weinberger Denies U.S. Used Israeli Senator's Espionage Allegation 'Wrong'; Gulf Defense Vowed

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Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger denied yesterday that the United States used an Israeli military officer to spy on Israel and said that it had been "very damaging and very wrong" for Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.) to suggest that such a spy operation took place.

In an interview on NBC News' "Meet the Press," Weinberger also said that the United States is "fully prepared to do what is necessary" to protect shipping in the Persian Gulf against a growing threat of attack by Iranian missiles.

But Weinberger denied that the United States is planning military action against Iran to protect shipping in the gulf. "We are doing exactly what we do all the time in the event we are needed," he said.

The defense secretary was asked about Durenberger's assertion before two Jewish-American audiences in Palm Beach, Fla., last week that William J. Casey, then director of central intelligence, had "changed the rules of the game" by authorizing a spy operation against Israel following its 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Durenberger is a former chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

Durenberger's disclosure of the episode, first reported by the Jerusalem Post, was later confirmed by two sources who said that the disaffected Israeli military officer volunteered to provide limited, classified information to the United

States that proved to be "not dramatic, but useful."

"I know that's not the case," Weinberger said yesterday when asked about the spying operation. He added:

"These are the most damaging kinds of statements because they immediately get picked up and used as justification for further espionage against the United States. I think it's a very damaging and very wrong statement."

Durenberger was in Minnesota yesterday and could not be reached. His administrative assistant, Doug Kelly, said, "Sen. Durenberger disagrees with the secretary's comments but will have no further comment at this time."

Durenberger's remarks about U.S. spying came at a delicate moment in U.S.-Israeli relations because of the spy scandal involving Jonathan Jay Pollard, an American and a former Navy intelligence analyst whom Israel recruited in 1984 to spy on the United States. Pollard has been sentenced to life imprisonment for espionage.

Weinberger repeated that the Reagan administration remains dissatisfied with Israel's response to the Pollard case, which he said had caused "very serious damage" to U.S. interests.

The defense secretary was questioned extensively about the threat to shipping in the Persian Gulf by Iran's deployment of long-range, Chinese-made missiles known as Silkworms near the Strait of Hormuz, the gulf's narrow choke point.

The administration has warned Iran against interfering with shipping in the gulf. The administration is also said to be seriously considering an informal suggestion by Kuwait that U.S. naval vessels escort Kuwaiti oil tankers, which are increasingly under Iranian attack.

Weinberger appeared to invite Kuwait and other countries in the gulf region to submit a formal request for U.S. help.

"We are certainly very sympathetic to and listening carefully to any suggestions for our assistance in keeping navigation free in that area," he said. He added that if such

requests are made "and the host countries are anxious to have us help, we are fully prepared to help."

Meanwhile, in his first television interview since being named White House chief of staff, former senator Howard H. Baker Jr. said on ABC News' "This Week With David Brinkley" that there is "a good possibility" of a summit conference between President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev later this year.

Citing progress toward an agreement on intermediate-range missiles, Baker said, "I would not be surprised if General Secretary Gorbachev came to the United States this year, but I have no assurance of that and no concrete indication of that."

Baker sounded equally optimistic when asked about the prospect of further damaging revelations in the Iran-contra affair when former National Security Council officials Rear Adm. John M. Poindexter and Marine Lt. Col. Oliver L. North testify before congressional committees.

"I'm convinced that we are not likely to have any big new devastating development in the testimony of North and Poindexter," he said.

"I think that both Admiral Poindexter and Colonel North are patriotic Americans," Baker added. "And I don't believe for one moment that they're going to try to fabricate or fudge on the facts in order to save their own skin at the expense of the president."

Asked about former president Jimmy Carter's sharp criticism of Reagan during Carter's trip to the Middle East, Baker said he was unaware that "he was going to savage President Reagan in Cairo. I think that was unfortunate, and I think it was a mistake," Baker said.